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Consumer Generated Media and Their Impacts on the Decisions of Travelers: The Case of Tripadvisor's Online Reviews in Morocco

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Abstract: Tourism is considered today as one of the pillars of any given economy and many countries seek its growth and flourish. The present study highlights the crucial role of Tripadvisor and Booking.com which are used by more than 100 million users around the world in promoting the reputation of the Moroccan e-tourism and e-WOM. Millions of tourists and travelers rely on the reviews of well-renowned consumer generated media rather than using the services of traditional websites provided by governments, travel agents and hotels. The growing cases of deception and fake content prompt the consumer to look for reliable and trustworthy information based on previous experiences of real reviewers. This study further sheds light on the factors participating in the amelioration of the CGM which can influence the tourism industry in Morocco, including trustworthiness of the source, trustworthiness of the content, customer's satisfaction and customer's experience with consumer generated media.

Keywords: Trustworthiness, Word-of-mouth, Consumer Generated Media

1. Introduction

Social and digital media have played an essential role in improving the tourism industry and they have enabled customers and travelers to communicate and interact inductively and deductively with the hotel and agency [10]. The hotel manager can interact with the customer and ensure the quality of the product effectively throughout the reliance on certain media channels and social networks including Facebook, Twitter, Tripadvisor, and Instagram [37]. The importance of the internet services stems from its proliferation and its use by billions of users from different continents. Travel Industry Association of America conducted a study in 2005 and the results indicated that 64% of American travelers rely on search engines while planning for their trips [52].

Recently, travelers trust the recommendations of search and engines and social media to reserve a room in a particular hotel or to visit a specific city or country [47]. Tripadvisor and Booking.com are the world's largest travel websites that equip travelers with the platforms of certain hotels and help them make their final decision regarding certain brands and products. These websites provide the traveler with a space to share their opinions, experience, and feedback in a particular destination [34, 35].

A study revealed that 60% of American travels used the services of Tripadvisor in choosing their destination and accommodation whereas Tripadvisor mobile application was downloaded at least by 100 million users in the US in 2014 [37]. This study exhibits the importance of this mobile application and others whose users share their photos and maps. Also, figures from Google revealed that more than 80% of travelers checked their potential travels online and visited 26 websites and spent more than 2 hours seeking a suitable destination [53].

Travelers further depend on the services of several recommender systems to eventually assist them to take their decision and to overcome information overload [43] such as Collaborative Filtering recommender systems [32] that are

based on the past experiences of travelers to filter the most appropriate choice for the seeker [33]. Netfix and Amazon.com are examples of recommender systems that rely on filtering to satisfy the tastes of their customers and equip them with the maximum amount of information germane to the target destination [12].

People tend today to depend on the advice, experience and opinion of certain consumer generated media rather than focusing on tour operators or agents. Consumer generated media have so far influenced the traveler's decisions to the extent that the latter inquires about the accommodation, the food and the monuments to visit as well [14, 50]. Consumer generated media have also assisted travels to avoid the worst choices and brands and to improve their decision with respect to that particular country, city, hotel or restaurant [15].

Studies and surveys have indicated that travelers trust consumer generated media more than the official destination website or the travel agent [18]. Nevertheless, certain news reports shed light on cases of deception committed by hotel managers and staffs that created fake accounts on tripadvisors' websites and shared fake reviews to boost the quality of their products and encourage travelers to visit their hotels [51]. Another attempt to reveal the failure of Tripadvisor and other consumer generated media was made by a British Businessman who set up a fake restaurant, receiving positive reviews germane to the food and service at the restaurant [54]. These reports provided clear-cut evidence that the content and reviews do not necessarily and thoroughly reflect the truth and that customers should be careful in dealing with the experience and opinion of other travelers [48].

However, consumer generated media have played a crucial role in enhancing the reputation of several destinations worldwide along with the world travel exhibitions which are annually organized in different countries. Tripadvisor is considered as a pillar in the world of tourism and is used by travel agencies to advertise the product and introduce accommodation to the consumer [42]. Morocco is not an exception as it received more than 11 million tourists in 2016 due to different factors [30]. The questions that arise in this case are: Is Tripadvisor crucial in enhancing the image of the tourism industry in Morocco? Do Moroccan travel agencies rely on Tripadvisor to advertise their products? Do tourists rely on Tripadvisor as a guide while they are in Morocco?

The present research tries to answer these questions that are deductively related to trust. Therefore, it is essential to reveal the significance of trust in affecting the consumer's behavior. Further, this research explores the intention of the traveler to adopt the advice given from consumer generated media to consume a specific commodity and brand.

2. Review of the Literature

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Travelers tend to make their own research regarding the target destination prior to leaving their original countries and most of them seek discounts and appropriate accommodations that suit their budgets and, thus, they look for online consumer reviews such as Tripadvisor, Holiday Watchdog and Yelp [22]. Online Consumer reviews are directly linked to any positive or negative opinion or statement made by former travelers to a destination and aim at helping the seeker to be equipped with adequate knowledge concerning the target destination [22].

Most of the research in the field highlights the motivation of travelers who write reviews related to their past experiences for the sake of influencing other customers either to positively or negatively interact with a particular commodity or brand [19]. Research in the tourism industry has so far proven a substantial relationship between online consumer reviews and the sales of hotel rooms [49]. Also, it has revealed the significance of consumer generated media in the rate of purchases and sites to be visited [15].

Consumer generated media have the influence of official information provided by official government websites [23] and websites such as Tripadvisor are so renowned to the extent that they may affect the decision of the potential 200 million travelers who visit the website on a monthly basis seeking the recommendations and experience with respect to restaurants, coffee shops, public markets, hotels and cities as well [53].

The millions of travelers who use and benefit from the services of Tripadvisor reveal the significance of trust and the efforts of the website to be an utter trustworthy reference in the field of tourism and travel [2]. However, it is of paramount importance to shed light on the issue of trust and how it affects the decision-making process of the traveler. Research related to online trust has begun to attract the attention of many scholars, especially in commerce to help identify and satisfy the needs of the consumer [55]. The existing research focused on e-tourism and the effects of online travel reviews on the reliability of hotels and the role of online reviews in minimizing the risk of taking inappropriate decisions by travelers [49, 20]. The study [2] studied the impact of consumer generated media for travel planning by the traveler and also it shed light on crucial role of the usefulness, trustworthiness and enjoyment in taking the decision to visit a destination. Trust in commercial and non-commercial websites was also surveyed by the study [5]. The latter studied the cases of trust and classified them into three major categories, namely customer-based antecedents, website based antecedents and company-based antecedents.

3. Trustworthiness of Source

The study [26] define trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party". Trust seems to be a critical factor in determining the reliability and dependence of the traveler on a specific destination and the acceptance or refusal of a message provided by a particular consumer generated medium [27]. The study [44] found a strong relationship linking the

notion of trust to social exchange theory. The latter is based on the vitality of social interaction and its benefits that lead the individual to be socially active and to interact and exchange relationships that stem from a high level of trust. The study [29] also indicated in a study that exchange of private information with others is the result of trust and experience which is a pre-condition in revealing certain secrets.

However, it is difficult to assess the credibility of several e-word-of-mouths (e-WOM) online website due to several factors, including the sender who writes reviews anonymously and without any relation with the receiver [40, 13]. In fact, different studies have demonstrated an inadequate relationship between the credibility of source and the intention of users to use consumer generated media in travel planning [3].

Nonetheless, consumer generated media tend to benefit from antecedent pitfalls and endeavor to rectify them. Tripadvisor, as an example, requires certain steps to complete the registration of a new contributor including the profile picture; the visited places, etc. Also, Tripadvisor relies on a new badge system to evaluate the different levels of reviewers according to their expertise and these reviews can fluctuate between reviewer and top contributor depending on the number of posts and reviews published [9].

Thus, these procedures and others may enhance the performance of consumer generated media and prompt the user to further trust these online websites. In this study, it is essential to argue that the credibility of the source and reviewers could increase the confidence of the potential tourist towards the used medium and push them to determine their future destinations. The reputation of the destination or accommodation is sometimes at risk due to dissemination of rumors which weaken the number of visits and affect the destination negatively. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1. Trustworthiness of consumer generated media increases and affects the destination positively.

4. Content Trustworthiness

The quality of content plays a crucial role in the growth of the tourism industry [39]. According to the study [8], content quality is featured by its relevancy, accuracy, value, credibility, currency, sufficiency, and usefulness [8, 39] in order to be trusted by the traveler and to take consumer generated media seriously. The quality of information is vital, especially in intention purchase germane to commercial online websites [24]. Trustworthiness, of the source along with the accuracy, credibility and usefulness of the content prompts the traveler in general to consider the information provided by the consumer generated medium and even share it with others [31].

Travelers consider the different reviews for the sake of taking a rudimentary and, sometimes, a decisive decision. Nonetheless, there are certain factors that should be taken into account and they are totally related to the tourism industry. The first factor incorporates the different choices and tastes of consumers. The industry is not just linked to hotels, but it encompasses restaurants, coffee shops, transportation, etc.,

and it is a prerequisite to take the taste and needs of the consumer into account [3].

Some travelers might be interested in cheap packages whereas others seek comfort and extravagance. Thus, optimal consumer generated media should consider the needs of different consumers while providing a rich and varied content to highly satisfy the expectations of the traveler [46] Also, supplying the needs of the customer is based on neutrality and the avoidance of biased reviews that might damage the reputation of a specific consumer generated medium due to the loss of its credibility, value and accuracy [15].

If the quality of content is to be valued positively by the consumer, the online website will prove its quality and relevance and it will achieve its targets as well. Consumer generated media opt for making lucrative benefits and this goal is directly germane to the trust of the consumer who seeks more information provided by the website or refrain from utilizing it which can result in the destruction of the business [15]. Therefore, it is essential to hypothesize that:

H2. The quality of reviews' content affects confidence towards consumer generated media positively.

Another crucial factor in the success of any given consumer generated medium is the safety of navigator's data along with their satisfaction [4]. The success of consumer generated media also relies, to a large extent, on the facilitation and simplification of communication between customers themselves [3].

5. Customer's Satisfaction

The customer's satisfaction is not just related to one product or service, but it is measured by the general satisfaction experienced in several commodities and brands [38]. The study [41] concluded in a study that a previous positive experience with an online shopping company definitely boost trust and confidence in the clients and push them to deal with the same online e-company and to purchase their products. As a consequence, travelers who experience satisfaction with a consumer generated medium will be more likely to consider the reviews positively.

Consumer generated media user mostly seeks an atmosphere of confidence and the advice of other users who can help them take their decisions [17]. CGM users generally feel empowered and well-equipped if they meet their expectations and find what they desire in an online travel website, including information about special hotels, restaurants and places. On the other hand, imprecise reviews and fake information will absolutely incite distrust and disappointment by the user [16] who will believe that the consumer generated medium does not possess the adequate tools to fight fake and biased reviews and, thus, e-WOM websites will lose their credibility and accuracy [7].

In addition, the user's level of proficiency and experience with online services and the Internet, in general, can be a determinant and decisive factor in consumer generated media trustworthiness [5]. Studies have demonstrated that online users with a professional level do not easily trust the content

on the Internet, but they are rather very cautious and skeptic regarding that content [6]. Users with a high level of proficiency devote an important amount of time using the Internet and, therefore, they are familiar with other experiences associated to previous case of deception shared on the Internet [1].

The study [11] indicated in a study the same findings, demonstrating that high level of proficiency largely affects the decision of the online user and mitigate their confidence towards online commodities and brands. Other surveys have shown that first-time-online users are more likely to be deceived owing to their lack of experience and fake reviews [6]. E-WOM is also associated to past experiences shared on social media. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social networks are also means utilized by previous reviewers to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction about particular product and they are used by hundreds of millions of users [56].

The importance of any given consumer generated medium is based on the number of users. Therefore, CGM monitors look for real and concrete techniques to simplify its use and guarantee its safety to boost confidence amongst the users [16]. The growing number of users of CGM encourages sponsors to advertise their products, believing in its strength and value [45]. Lucrative benefits and revenues are the main concern of consumer generated media which endeavor to impress and influence the user by revealing the high value of the website.

A study by the market research firm ComScore Inc in 2010 indicated that more than 1.2 billion used social networks at least once a month and this number increased to reach 1.5 billion users in 2012 [25]. Trust in social networks resulted in their dominance and monopoly of the market with approximately 71% of the advertisements that appeared on Facebook and Twitter [25].

Besides, the adoption of reviews and recommendations by online users and travelers largely depends on the measures of trust towards the website or CGM as aforementioned [8]. Credibility of the website also relies on its monitors who can turn it either to a trustworthy or abandoned source as monitors should consider the fake submissions and reviews and attempt to rectify them [28].

6. Methodology

The review of the literature of the existing background and contributions about the subject to reveal the viewpoints of different researchers who shed light on trip advisor along with other media outlets helped construct the research framework in a clear way. The scarcity of studies regarding the subject in Morocco makes this research amongst the pioneering studies in treating the role of consumer generated media in Morocco.

Other data were selected from literature, articles and journals. The analysis of this collected data provided a first insight on certain consumer generated media, the preferred destinations, and the opinion of tourists regarding their positive and negative experience. It is also of paramount significance to mention that the qualitative and quantitative methods are used in this study.
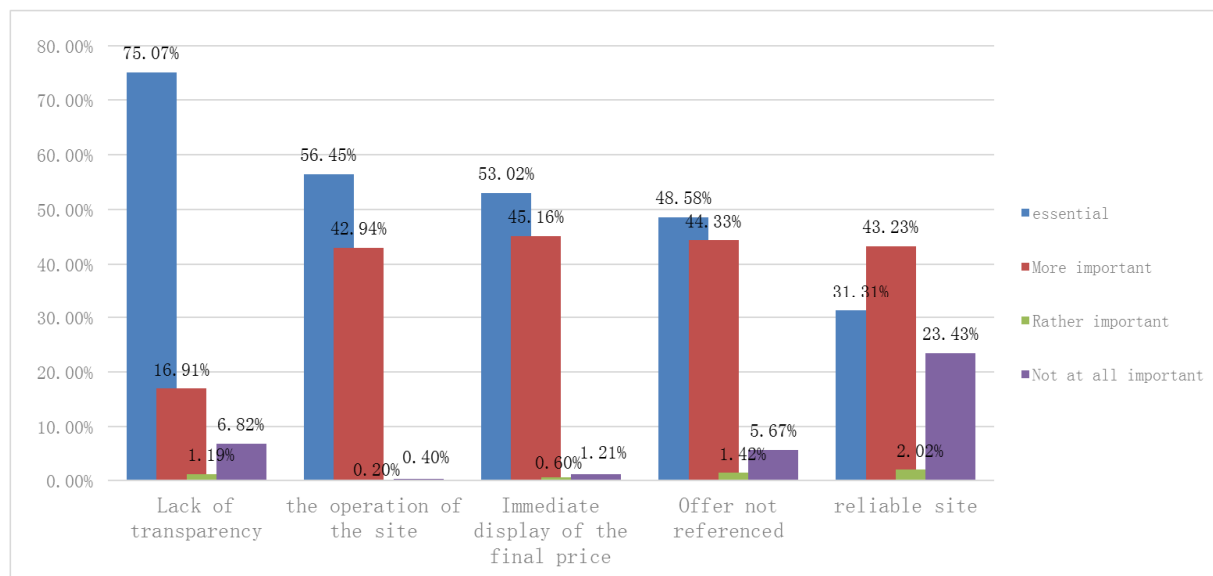

Figure 1. Main indicators stated by tourists.

The self-administered questionnaire of the field study was designed in French and English to collect data owing to the specificities and features of Morocco which relies on French in the bulk of administrations in the public as well as the private sectors. Personal questions about gender, age, degree of satisfaction, etc., are included in the questionnaire. The field study targeted to survey a sample of 260 tourists in four Moroccan cities, namely Marrakech, Essaouira, Agadir and Safi. To simplify the collection of data, the questionnaires were distributed in travel agencies, hotels, and restaurants from 23 January to 30 February 2018. Finally, 200 questionnaires were kept, while the others were incomplete or not clear to codify. The questionnaires were analyzed using IBM SPSS statistics Base 22.0 and Microsoft Excel Office.

7. Results and Discussion

According to our field survey, the problem of many platforms is utterly germane to their lack of transparency. A good platform ought to be related to utter transparency in terms of the prices and operation of the site along with an immediate display of the final price which reveals a wide variety of information on the webpage.

In fact, the analysis reveals that most users do not know that the majority of online platforms are not really familiar with the cheapest benefits, but they are rather informed about the least expensive benefits among the merchant companies that pay to be displayed on the platform. Consequently, not all offers are listed and this fact affects online and offline competition between travel agents as is shown in figure 1. These platforms have so far achieved lucrative benefits due to their colossal resources that allow them to carry out large-scale promotional campaigns and develop in parallel with online travel agencies and mobile applications.
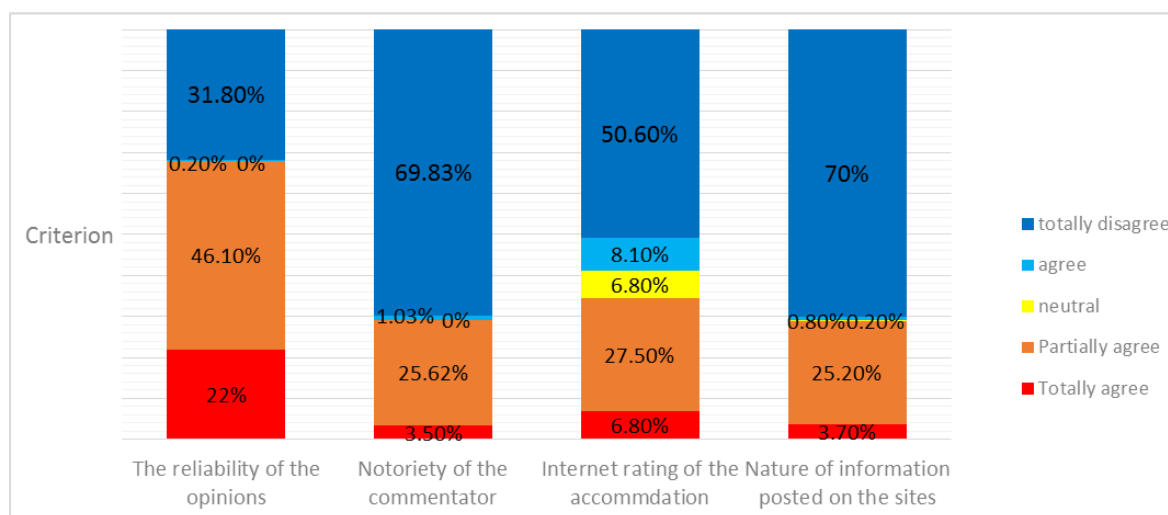

Figure 2. *Level of confidence towards consumer generated media.*

Consumer insights on websites like Tripadvisor or Holidaychecking have revolutionized the tourism industry, forcing travel agencies, hotels and other professionals to adapt to these ratings that make and break reputations (see Figure 2). This study also aims to examine the degree of agreement or disagreement regarding certain criteria, including the degree of reliability among those tourists that have already visited such accommodations. Experience in this case is significant as new tourists rely heavily on the opinion and experience of other tourists that are considered as a reliable source.

Also, testing the level of confidence, suggested by the respondents during the qualitative study, deserves to be taken into consideration in order to measure its impact on the selection of hotels by e-tourists. The analysis indicated that 70% of respondents trust consumer generated media while only 3.5%.

The bulk of hotels and tourist accommodations, globally, have their own websites which aim at introducing the client to the services and product, in general. Tourists willing to spend their holidays in Morocco endeavor to familiarize themselves with the target destination. They rely on the services of certain consumer generated media to help them determine whether the destination deserves to be visited or whether they should seek a different alternative. The analysis of the responses of tourists in Morocco revealed that they, to a large extent, relied on the services of Booking.com and Tripadvisor. They benefited from the comments and opinions of tourists that have already spent their holidays in Morocco. They also manifested that visiting the accommodation's official website was their second alternative after reading the comments and opinions of commentators on Booking.com, Tripadvisor and other consumer generated media to avoid fraud.

8. Conclusion

Tripadvisor and Booking.com are considered today as crucial tourist players. Both are disruptive actors in the service of a free economy where tourists share and coordinate while breaking down traditional legal barriers. This is an argument that is not utterly accepted and disturbs the traditional players who still rely heavily on traditional services. Drawing its strength from artificial intelligence and networking of professionals and customers, consumer generated media provide tourists with services they are eager to be familiar with prior to visiting the target destination, including Morocco.

This article focuses on the advent of certain consumer generated media, including Tripadvisor as well as their impacts on the behavior and decision of tourists who visited Morocco and benefited from the services offered by such platforms. We were able to highlight the importance of the collaborative offer of traditional structures (hotels, riads, guest house, etc.) but potential tourists prefer, nowadays, the services of social networks and platforms to deepen their knowledge regarding the destination, its offers, prices, landscapes and monuments which are not offered by several

traditional structures. Also, the analysis revealed that the bulk of respondents in this study relied on the services and experience of other tourists on Tripadvisor and Booking.com.

The analysis we suggest in this study is contextual and encompasses other Moroccan destinations with their own unique features and characteristics. It paves the way to several other studies that can highlight other aspects that we have not been able to address in this study. These as well as other issues can provide a comprehensive reading on the chances and limitations offered by consumer generated media and other platforms and their effects on marketing germane to the tourism industry in Morocco in general.

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